

The Psychedelic Self at Play: Re-reading Whimsy in the early music of Pink Floyd

By James Barrett

Members of the band, fans and critics have referred to Pink Floyd's early-recorded musical compositions (1966-1969) as whimsical.¹ Roger Waters, a founding member of the group, qualified whimsy in the early music when he said, "My big fight in Pink Floyd, was to try and drag it, kicking and screaming, back from the whimsy that Syd was into - as beautiful as it is - into my concerns, which were more political and philosophical" (*Guardian*, 2004, n.p.). The early songs, such as *The Gnome*, *Chapter 24*, *Arnold Lane* and *See Emily Play* certainly generate strange and humorous reactions. But to say this music is not political is to severely discount both the artistic inspiration and the reception these songs received when they were first released. In fact, the early music of Pink Floyd is a literary and cultural phenomenon that represents a mass psychedelic movement with implications that are only beginning to be accepted by broader mainstream culture today.

In the following chapter I examine whimsy as a trope in the early music of Pink Floyd, demonstrating a spontaneous quality that challenges stable and linear conceptions of time, with juxtaposition and illogicality often present. But whimsy is only the surface of what the early music of Pink Floyd represents. I begin by establishing the concept of the psychedelic self, a radical image of the human subject that includes whimsy but that is not defined by it. I then go on to read thirteen early compositions by Pink Floyd that demonstrate elements of whimsy and that correspond to the psychedelic self. Finally I argue the image of the psychedelic self in the songs matches the conditions of LSD intoxication that researchers in the neurological sciences are only now managing to describe clinically (Letheby & Gerrans 2017, Liechti 2017, Lebedev et. el. 2015). I conclude that the musical legacy of Pink Floyd is a sustainable one, with our understanding of cognition just now catching up and projecting into the future an image of the self that embraces fragmentation of self-identity, multiple simultaneous cognitive perspectives and non-linear temporality.

The Psychedelic Self

Whimsy is a trope with political implications due to how it constructs an image of the psychedelic self. Therefore it is necessary to trace the connections between the three points; whimsy, psychedelia and the self it represents. This line of associations begins with the chapter *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* in Kenneth Graham's 1908 novel *The Wind in the Willows*, which references a type of music that seems similar to that of the early Pink Floyd;

"Hark to the wind playing in the reeds!
"It's like music – far-away music," said the Mole nodding
drowsily.
"So I was thinking." murmured the Rat, dreamful and languid.
"Dance music, the lilting sort that runs on without a stop – but

¹ Whimsy is defined as "funny or unusual" or "something that is intended to be strange and humorous but in fact has little real meaning or value" (*Cambridge Dictionary* n.p.)

with words in it too – it passes into words and out of them again
 – I catch them at intervals – then it is dance music once more
 and then nothing but the reed’s soft thin whispering” (p141).

The qualities of the music discussed by Rat and Mole foreshadow the basic importance of rhythm, sustain and improvisation that the early Pink Floyd created and explored. The essence of the description, and indeed of *The Wind in the Willows* text itself, is whimsy. When Rat and Mole encounter the God Pan, asleep in “the place of my song-dream” (Graham 1978, p134), they introduce a darker and more mystical whimsy that overturns many ordinary preconceptions regarding time and reality. The chapter *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* from where it comes was taken as the name of the first Pink Floyd album in 1967.

The early music of Pink Floyd was a leading part of a new genre of psychedelic rock music. The music was best experienced in live concerts, often in multimedia environments where the audience participated in the show, called ‘freak outs’, through dance, projections, lighting, and sound effects with extravagant clothing and the taking of the psychedelic drug LSD (called ‘acid’). A fan of that time reflects on Pink Floyd as, “the first authentic sound of acid consciousness [...]. They’d be up on stage like supernatural gargoyles playing their spaced-out music, and the same colour that was exploding over them was exploding over us. It was like being taken over, mind, body and soul.” (Mason 2005, p57). The London venues the Roundhouse, UFO and Middle Earth, and one-off events like Games for May (1967) or The 14 Hour Technicolor Dream (1968) became multimedia environments where the music of Pink Floyd was first heard by many. At these events “the band actually disappeared. The band was virtually lost in the light show. The Pink Floyd was not a band that put their faces forward. They were anonymous makers of sound.” (Gammond 2008, 48:57mins).² These events were the spatial realization of the imagery and ideas that were expressed in the songs of Pink Floyd and that were shared with the audience.

The events became part of a larger creative culture, with many other musicians, artists, poets, writers, designers, playwrights, sculptors and philosophers joining in what was commonly known as Swinging London.³ Amidst the swirl of London at this time there was an image of humans as a specific subject shared by many. This was perhaps most clearly articulated initially on 11th June 1965 when “an audience of 7,000 filled the Royal Albert Hall to watch and hear readings by seventeen mainly American and British poets including Adrian Mitchell, Michael Horovitz and Beat guru Allen Ginsberg” (Smith 2016, n.p.). In the words of Barry Miles, who was there, ‘all these people recognized each other and they all realized they were part of the same scene.’ (Smith 2016, n.p.). “The International Poetry Incarnation” (also called “Wholly Communion”, after the 1965 Peter Whitehead film documenting it) was the moment when a counter cultural scene became publicly recognizable in London. It is

² This anonymous element is referenced by Cunningham, according to how “the Floyd placed little emphasis on themselves as performers, preferring to give audiences an experience that relied on this interaction of sound, light and atmosphere” (Cunningham 1997 n.p.).

³ The manager of Pink Floyd, Peter Jenner writes of the Technicolor Dream that it was “The high point of the psychedelic era for me. It was a perfect setting, everyone had been waiting for them and everyone was on acid; that event was the peak of acid use in England, [...] everybody was on it, the bands, the organizers, the audience, and I certainly was” (Roberts 119).

remarkable that this moment of recognition is also accompanied by a detailed series of texts that describe the philosophy, thoughts, ideas, fantasies and aspirations of the movement behind it. When Alan Ginsberg read two of his own poems, he read the following lines;

Tonite let's all make love in London
as if it were 2001 the years
of thrilling god—
And be kind to the poor soul that cries in
a crack of the pavement because he
has no body—
Prayers to the ghosts and demons, the
lackloves of Capitals & Congresses
who make sadistic noises
on the radio—
Statue destroyers & tank captains, unhappy
murderers in Mekong & Stanleyville,
That a new kind of man has come to his bliss
to end the cold war he has borne
against his own kind flesh
since the days of the snake. – Alan Ginsberg, *Who Be Kind To*, 1965

Kindness, prayer and pacifisms are qualities of this “new kind of man” (*sic*), arguably not so new as counter culture ideals. But Ginsberg highlights an important distinction in this new self; the presence and acceptance of the body, “to end the cold war he has borne/ against his own kind flesh”.⁴ The poor soul crying from a crack in the pavement (cement urban run down and crowded – lacking space) does not have a body. The psychedelic self is blood and flesh and spirit in convergence. The undesirables – “lackloves of Capitals and Congress” - are disembodied as “sadistic noises on the radio”. Throughout the subsequent creative expression related to the psychedelic experience and culture, the body is equal to, and in congress with, the mind. Through this undivided self flow ideas about community, family, truth, the state, spirituality, duty and knowledge.

The psychedelic self is not just the state of mind that results from the taking of ‘acid’ or LSD. This self exists in the contexts provided by culture, community, fashion, philosophy, music, art and literature (and now history). In 1967, “Swinging London was just as much about acid as it was about anything else that year. Acid was the perfect drug for the moment; it gave the already shimmering world just the right effervescence” (Brown & Gaines 224). The city was already shimmering with economic prosperity and social mobility emerging in a culture that was producing a generation of educated youth possessed of a degree of disposable income and that were raised in a strengthening middle-class. These factors combined with a developing post-colonial multiculturalism and growing sense of internationalism, and with the resistance to the disaster that was the war in Vietnam. The divide between generations and a dissatisfaction with the morals, ethics and aspirations of the previous generation made LSD

⁴ By self I mean what Michel Foucault meant, “the thinking subject” (Foucault 22). Furthermore; “The self is an object whose continued existence explains the co-occurrence of physical and psychological attributes” (Letheby & Gerrans 1).

and the philosophies and ideas that came to be associated with it (e.g. 'free love', anti-materialism and the appropriation of various Eastern philosophies and religions), a ripe cultural moment by the second half of the 1960s. As David Toop observes regarding the music of the time, "The collective long-duration improvisations and semi-improvisations that were so prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s embodied the era's conjectural societies and their rites, laboratories for hypothetical forms of communality" (Toop 187). The music of Pink Floyd was at the forefront of this communality, and the sacrament for so many people at the time was LSD. As their then-manager Pete Jenner said, "There we were quite clearly simulating drug experiences, that's part of what we were doing. Hey when you take a trip, you hear sounds like this and then we played it to them" (Cavanagh 43-44). The result was a leading position in the counter culture movement of growing proportions with influence and a sense of cultural change.

As the Counter Culture became more established and (ironically) popular, the ideas associated with it were expressed in the media it published. Central to this culture was LSD as a shared technology that allowed for a common self-identity, both on a personal and social level. Those that took acid became "travellers [that] returned from LSD trips with tales of other dimensions, other ways of seeing, other ways of thinking, and, most importantly, other ways of being" (Roberts 2008, p4). Michael Hollingshead, a leading figure in the early psychedelic scene, writes "people who have had a psychedelic experience can 'tune-in' to the secret and occult, in which God is better honoured and loved by silence than by words, and better seen by closing the eyes to images than by opening them" (Hollingshead 1973, p140). Leary comments on the same experience, with the LSD trip described as the awareness "of processes you never tuned into before. You feel yourself sink down into the soft tissue swamp of your own body, slowly drifting down dark red waterways and floating through capillaries canals, softly propelled through endless cellular factories, ancient fibrous clockworks - ticking, clicking, chugging, pumping relentlessly" (Leary 1992, p137). But the body could become entirely something else. One example is an LSD experience by a person who states: "I found my awareness slipping inside that of the daffodil. While still being conscious of sitting in a chair, I could also sense my petals! Then an exquisite sensation cascaded through me, and I knew I was experiencing light falling on those petals" (Devereaux 1997, p27).⁵ These changes had inevitable results on a personal level and this then went on to play a collective role in the culture. These changes that occurred with the use of LSD in both perception and identity, as I discuss below, are represented in the lyrics of Pink Floyd at the time.

Pink Floyd is globally recognized as ushering in a mass psychedelic culture through their early music. But despite this association, the band and its management have been at pains to

⁵ "The concept [of Set and Setting], which was first proposed by Timothy Leary and his group at Harvard, claimed that the character of a psychedelic experience is determined first and foremost by the user's character, expectations and intentions (Set), as well as by the social and physical surrounding in which the drug experience takes place (Setting). Leary went as far as to claim that 99% of the specific response to LSD is determined by set-and-setting" (Harogsohn 2013 p 6). See also Hartogsohn (2016). "Set and setting, psychedelics and the placebo response: an extra-pharmacological perspective on psychopharmacology". Roberts (2008) claims, "Later recreational LSD users would find the combination of these two factors could be decisive in how an LSD experience would develop" (15).

distance their public image from the perceived excesses of the psychedelic movement. It was even necessary for their record company EMI to publish a press release in April 1967 after their debut on Top of the Pops, which stated; “The Pink Floyd does not know what people mean by psychedelic pop and are not trying to cause hallucinatory effects on their audience” (Palacios 2010, p200). Nick Mason (2005) recounts the band was too busy writing the music and performing to ‘share in the psychedelic experience’:

We may have been adopted as the house orchestra but we rarely got to share in the psychedelic experience. We were out of it, not on acid but out of the loop, stuck in the dressing room at UFO. We were busy being a band: rehearsing, travelling to gigs, packing up and driving home. Psychedelia was around us but not within us. We might buy a book at Indica, but we certainly never had time to linger. We read IT [International Times] but the primary reason was to check whether we had a review or not. Of the band, Syd was perhaps slightly more intrigued by the wider aspects of psychedelia, and drawn to some of the philosophical and mystical aspects that his particular group of friends was exploring. But although he was interested, I don’t think – like the rest of us if we had wanted to - he had enough time to become fully immersed in the scene. (p.51)

But even as a denial, it is clear Mason is aware of the cultural connection between the music of Pink Floyd and psychedelia. Mason even elaborates on what psychedelia means as a culture and an experience; to be ‘out of it’ (i.e. on LSD), to buy and presumably read books from counter culture bookshop Indica, and to “read IT”, along with being intrigued by and drawn to the philosophical and mystical aspects of the culture. According to Mason, the psychedelic culture was dependent on the experience of taking acid, as it needed to be ‘within us’. While the psychedelic scene swirled around them, and they were a leading creative force that contributed to it, the members of Pink Floyd were fast becoming professional and commercial musicians, whether they liked it or not. The association between whimsy and the early Pink Floyd may be a distancing from the psychedelic culture at the time. Not only was the taking of LSD illegal after 1966 in the UK, the powers that organized the music industry at the time, such as the BBC (which banned *Arnold Layne* from broadcast) did not want to be associated with the counter culture.

Today the history of the early Pink Floyd is dominated by the presence of the singer, guitarist, and chief songwriter Roger ‘Syd’ Barrett (1946-2006). Barrett has often been idealized as a broken genius, in the Romantic tradition of the fatally cursed young artist, after leaving the group in 1968 under difficult circumstances. Furthermore Barrett is often held up as the key representative for psychedelic culture in Pink Floyd. He was also the least interested in being part of a commercially successful band (see Palacios 2010 p202-205). But the myth of Syd as an artistic and radical can be arguably said to function as an extension of the personality and ideology that is constructed in the songs of Pink Floyd. It is as though Syd has become a character from the narrative world of Pink Floyd, alongside Arnold Layne, Emily and Corporal Clegg, just as he later became a source for the character Pink in the film of *The Wall* (1979). For this reason alone it is worthwhile re-examining the narratives within the early

music of Pink Floyd and in doing so one cannot avoid the trope of whimsy in this same music.

As a musician Roger 'Syd' Barrett clearly had an aesthetic of song production. Barrett wrote the early singles and all but one of the songs on the first album *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967).⁶ Commenting on song writing, Syd said the lyrics were very important,

I think it's good if a song has more than one meaning. Maybe that kind of song can reach far more people - that's nice. On the other hand, I like songs that are simple. I liked 'Arnold Layne' because to me it is a very clear song. It would be terrific to do much more mood stuff. They're very pure, you know, the words (Palacios 2010 p365).

Barrett "collated 'moods' through words [...] infusing their songs with emotional resonance, mirroring their state of mind during composition" (Palacios 2010 p365). Norman Smith, the producer of the first Floyd album, *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* states it was not even music, as he understood it, rather, "a mood creation through sound is the best way I could describe The Floyd..." (Cavanagh 2003, 24). At the same time their first single, *Arnold Layne*, is a multi-tracked recording featuring drum repeats and sustain – on the instrumental and vocal tracks with echoes – which create the effect of looping time signatures on the track – (Multitrack Breakdown BBC). With *Arnold Layne* we first meet the growing complexity of Pink Floyd's music, which would culminate in the elaborate studio recordings and large-scale live concert productions of the 1970s. This complexity provided the sonic structure for the lyrics and the 'freak outs' when the music was performed live.

In 1968 Pink Floyd included for their live performance, along with their famous light shows, a Beat Frequency Oscillator, "basically a tone generator" according to Roger Waters (Gammond 2008, n.p.). Both Syd Barrett and Rick Wright used Binson Echorec effects units, "with its multiple tape heads, overloaded valve electronics and winking green 'magic eye' level indicator" (Cavanagh 2003, p30). By 1968, a device known as the Azimuth Coordinator was also used for live sound effects, as a spatial panning sound manipulator that could encircle the audience in a particular effect, such as footsteps or bird song, by moving it about the room. In 1968, tape phasing and many other effects were only possible in the studio. A test bed valve oscillator was one of the sound effects devices used on the Floyd's first album. The result is a throbbing rhythmic drone with samples and sound effects that define so much of the Floyd music of this period. The music is danceable, but at the same time it is ambient, floating and filled with vocals and effects that fade in and out, but also pulsate and build up into frantic crescendos. As John Cavanagh describes, "Pink Floyd delivered something new, a amalgam of melody, discord and abstract sound unlike anything that went before" (Cavanagh 2003, p31). Throughout their improvised and compositional work, "from very early in their career they were experimenting with unusual vocal sounds, especially on the backing vocals"

⁶ Roger Waters is credited with "Take Up Thy Stethoscope and Walk" but all the members of the band worked on many of the songs on *Piper* in the studio, with input coming from each person.

(BBC Radio 6). The result is a multimedia, multisensory performance experience for those that attended Pink Floyd performances, and later bought the records and tapes they released. The psychedelic self is a central element in the work produced and the performances of Pink Floyd from the early period. As I assert from my analysis of the lyrics, both time and memory are used within the performances and music of the group to present a new vision of the human subject.

Time and Memory

Pink Floyd lyrics often reference time and memory. In the early songs, time is a passing state of awareness that is associated with childhood as well as focusing on the present moment, the now, as being the only meaningful component of time. In Pink Floyd's "Remember a Day", written and sung by keyboardist Rick Wright from 1968, the past is "before today" when "you were young",

Remember a day before today
A day when you were young.
Free to play alone with time
Evening never came.
Sing a song that can't be sung

Memory is of being young, when we are "free to play alone with time", presumably in childhood. But then the narrative lyric shifts to present time, and asks the listener to "Sing a song that can't be sung". This line suggests a state beyond language, where experience is not mediated but is embodied. This concept is the point of access for the timeless state of childhood, when intellect is not the sole social interface and play is an important activity. The focus on childhood, the flattening out of the past, via memory into a single day, "before today" and the freedom to play are all elements of the whimsical. In this configuration, whimsy breaks free of the expectations and constraints of adulthood and the associated symbolic orders of time and language. The freedom is gained by living in a perpetual now, when "evening never came".

Time as a dimension of whimsy is not only related to memory and childhood in the music of Pink Floyd. In *Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun* (a Roger Waters composition from 1968) time as a system is transformed. We first encounter time at dawn, the leaves and the lotuses perhaps symbolic of the masses (the leaves) and the 'turned on' (the lotuses) in Swinging London, after an all night 'freak out' in the Alexandra Palace, All Saint's Church Hall or at the Roundhouse, trembling at dawn and then beginning a journey to "the heart of the sun",

Little by little the night turns around.
Counting the leaves which tremble at dawn.
Lotuses lean on each other in yearning.
Under the eaves the swallow is resting.
Set the controls for the heart of the sun.

The journey to the heart of the sun is to travel outside socially sanctioned time, to time-point-zero in relation to earth. The terrestrial calendar year, days, hours, minutes and seconds are calibrated according to the rotation and orbit of the earth around the sun. At the central point of the sun all such celestial movement is void and null. The sun rotates instead around Galactic Point Zero, the centre of the Milky Way Galaxy at an average velocity of 828,000 km/hr. The galactic year is about 230 million earth years long, in the time it takes the sun to make one complete orbit around the Milky Way. Such a temporal scale obliterates present human time scales and is meaningless to the culture we presently live in. This is the time-scale for the heart of the sun.

Against this vast cosmic temporality there is an inner world of *Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun*, represented by love giving over to myth,

Over the mountain watching the watcher.
Breaking the darkness
Waking the grapevine.
One inch of love is one inch of shadow
Love is the shadow that ripens the wine.
Set the controls for the heart of the sun.
The heart of the sun, the heart of the sun.

These lyrics “in fact owe much to an anthology of Chinese poetry called *Poems of the Late T'ang* by A. C. Graham, published by Penguin in 1965” (Pringle 2000 n.p.). Li Shangyin wrote 'One inch of love is an inch of ashes', while the Floyd lyric is 'One inch of love is one inch of shadow'. The introduction of the shadow is possibly the meeting with the subconscious, or those elements of the self that are suppressed. Love becomes the access point to this inner self and a meeting with the Other (the shadow). Furthermore the shadow can be related to the archetype of life itself, or that facing within of the unpleasant or forgotten elements of the personality. This idea comes from the work of G. G. Jung, who wrote;

Only when all props and crutches are broken, and no cover from the rear offers even the slightest hope of security does it become possible for us to experience an archetype that up to then had hidden behind the meaningful nonsense played out by the anima. This is the archetype of meaning, just as the anima is the archetype of life itself. (Jung 1981, p 66)

This traumatic breaking through to the archetypes of self is also described in relation to the LSD experience, as an expansion of consciousness and awareness of the divine (see Roberts 2008, 3, Stevens 1989, p439-449).

The ripening of the wine and its connection to love is an ancient image from European antiquity and the teachings of Gnostic Christianity. This same image is present in Pink Floyd's *Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun*;

Over the mountain watching the watcher.

Breaking the darkness
Waking the grapevine.

In mythology and gnostic scriptures ‘Waking the grapevine’ is represented by blood and the sexual congress of Eros with the earth (Gaia). Following the first intercourse (*sunousia*) of Eros with the earth, “The grapevine sprouted up from the blood which was poured upon the earth. Therefore those who drank it (the vine) engaged in themselves the desire for intercourse” (Bonney 1992, p193). From this myth, Bonney goes on to explain that “while the cosmogonic epiphany of Eros, which separates light from darkness, remains positive, that of the Eros who appeared ‘between angels and men’ would, through recourse to women cause a principle of death to enter the world” (Bonney 1992, p193-94). The watcher of *Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun* witnesses the breaking of darkness, through the epiphany of Eros, who joins with Gaia to give humanity the intoxicating vine. Like the primal image of the God Pan in *Wind in the Willows*, asleep in Kenneth Graham’s “place of my song-dream” (p134), “Waking the Grapevine” shifts awareness to myth and the inner self, through imagery that transcends the social.

The purpose of life is a consistent element in Pink Floyd lyrics, and this is addressed in the final verse of *Heart of the Sun* through a question, and an act of poetic adaptation. The darkness continues as an image in the lyric, with the sun perhaps failing,

Witness the man who raves at the wall
Making the shape of his questions to Heaven.
Whether the sun will fall in the evening
Will he remember the lesson of giving?
Set the controls for the heart of the sun.
The heart of the sun, the heart of the sun.

Once again the lyric is taken from the Graham translation of the Táng poet. The line ‘Witness the man who raves at the wall / Making the shape of his questions to Heaven’ is taken from ‘Don’t Go Out of the Gate’ by Li He (Li Ho) who wrote of an earlier Chinese poet, “Witness the man who raved at the wall as he wrote his questions to Heaven” according to the Graham translation (Pringle 2000, n.p.). The wall is distracting the subject from higher ideals, in an attempt to address heaven, but instead raves uselessly at ‘the wall’. To step outside time and be generous, “Remember the lesson of giving”, is to overcome “the man who raves at the wall”, in all of us, or the sense of the futility of outward, social communication and the constraints of worldly time. To connect with others through giving is to overcome loneliness, and to reach a new level of self beyond social conventions.

To summarize, in the songs *Remember a Day* and *Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun* memory and time are constructed as strange or unusual. The very strangeness of the lyrical world of these songs distances them from anything that could be political within the normal social world most people live in. It is therefore easy to understand how these lyrics can be considered to lack social value in the scope of whimsy. But rather the lyrics take up the value of concerning oneself with the inner universe, or a childhood perception or the cosmic

patterns of our planet, solar system and galaxy. Coupled with this is the time of myth, of the seasons and the interventions of the gods. All of the forms of time related to these references and the consequences that result from them are coupled to larger cosmic cycles. The sun in relation to the earth is made a symbol for a shift in human awareness, according to an increase in scale (i.e. the rotation of the Milky Way Galaxy and our 230 million year round trip through it) and how it operates outside the social conception of time. Furthermore, *Remember a Day* suggests a continuation of childhood up to the present moment when the listener is presumably hearing the song in that instance. Time becomes an eternal on-going now, a continual present as all past and future combined. Into this eternal now is introduced the mystical concept of “song that cannot be sung”, as a recognition that “the true Gnostic Te Deum cannot be sung at any one time only, but must be sung eternally; the man must transform himself into a perpetual song of praise in through and word and deed” (Mead 2016, p137).⁷ The introduction of myth into the lyrics negates “the social meaning of time, referring to the meaning which time acquired in the processes of production and consumption in the modern world” (Meyerhoff 1955, p91). By resisting the time of production and consumption as the social meaning of time, the narrative also resists a socio-cognitive system that “exhibits the same characteristics as the units of physical time and the units of sensory experience” (Meyerhoff 1955, p91). Childhood as a time, or the cosmic time of the galaxy both become sensory, embodied experiences in the lyrics of *Remember a Day* and *Set the Controls*. Both childhood as memory and cosmic time lead inwards to a self that is outside the sanctioned or clock time of society.

Memory and the Self

The whimsical in early Pink Floyd echoes what Henri Lefebvre refers to as a “reverse image” in film analysis, or “an image of everyday reality, taken in its totality or as a fragment, reflecting the reality in all its depth through people, ideas and things which are apparently quite different from everyday experience and therefore exceptional, deviant, abnormal” (Lefebvre 2014, p34). In the case of the early Pink Floyd this drawing on life to construct the whimsical is only half the picture. In the case of Pink Floyd the whimsical is applied to everyday life via the psychedelic, and everything becomes quite different in the everyday experience. Memory is compromised, such as the song *Paint Box* (1967), when entering a familiar room becomes a radically different experience to that which memory recalls;

“Getting up, I feel as if I’m remembering this scene before
I open the door to an empty room
Then I forget”

The act of “getting up”, with its double meaning as a counter culture slang term for experiencing the effects of a drug, becomes a feeling, a scene and a memory. But the memory, and perhaps the scene too, are forgotten. The room is empty, as is the memory. But observation continues, without participation as the door is opened revealing an empty room. Between the memory, which is now gone, and the experience under perception (i.e. opening the door, finding the room empty then forgetting) sits the self. The subject is not remembering

⁷ From the Latin *Te Deum laudamus*, rendered as “Thee, O God, we praise”.

something, the feeling 'I' is remembering together while the self, as a thinking entity is aware of it in memory. In this sense the psychedelic self does not represent an autonomous subject but a conglomerate of perspectives operating in a non-linear time. The memory and the event are simultaneous in a temporal point that seems to stand still, but then the memory is forgotten, raising the question: who is remembering what? Psychedelia becomes a systems-critical perspective, similar to play but with deeper personal and spiritual potentials.

Memory is an influential component of whimsy in early Pink Floyd music. The song "Matilda Mother" (1967) illustrates this influence. The original version of "Matilda Mother" quoted words from Hilaire Belloc's book "Cautionary Tales for Children" (1907).

"There was a boy whose name was Jim
His friends were very good to him
They gave him tea and toast and jam
And slices of delicious ham
Oh oh Mother
Tell me more"

But the estate of Belloc refused to give permission for the lines to be used in the song, so Barrett wrote his own lyrics (Cavanagh 2003, p45-46). The lyrics became a recounting of the time when Belloc's book featured in Barrett's life as a child in Cambridge. Matilda is a character from another poem in the same book. She told lies and was fittingly burned to death as a result of her indiscretion ("Matilda, Who told Lies, and was Burned to Death"). Matilda Mother (1967) takes on almost painterly visual qualities as a result of the mixture of memory and perspective.

"For all the time spent in that room
The doll's house, darkness, old perfume
And fairy stories held me high on
Clouds of sunlight floating by.
Oh Mother, tell me more
Tell me more."

The child's room and its features of scent and darkness become entwined with the Belloc book to create a new third voice produced by Barrett from memory. But there is another side to the narrative, of the hallucinatory world with "clouds of sunlight floating by" and its suggestion of alternate awareness. Memory in this case remains a mix of material perception, in the scent, light and space of a place, and in the disembodied projections of the mind ("Clouds of sunlight"). The body of the child is again in the dark. It is unclear if the doll's house is in the room or vice versa. Place, as the location where the book was experienced, becomes an important element in how the psychedelic self is further projected into time, though both psychedelic and physical impressions as a fragmented multisensory memory.

Likewise *Grantchester Meadows* (1969) evokes memory set in place, and as one of the first post-Barrett pieces by Pink Floyd that gained wide popularity it shows that themes continued

in the band with the dramatic change of his leaving. We are once again grounded in the remembering subject;

In the lazy water meadow I lay me down.
All around me golden sun flakes covering the ground.
Basking in the sunshine of a bygone afternoon
Bringing sounds of yesterday into my city room.

The “lazy water meadow” is a stretch of public land that hugs the River Cam between Cambridge and the village of Grantchester. It is a piece of classic English countryside, in summers of green water logged fields, a slow flowing river, rushes and willows, birds singing in the trees, the sun warm in the hazy sky. It was here that the youth of Cambridge, since the days of Rupert Brooke, would retreat to and enjoy, with parties and making their own brief world among the green. The Floyd lyric brings this back as a memory but it takes auditory and three-dimensional forms in the “city room” of the narrator. Memory transcends time, assisted by the sound effects of a looped skylark chirping throughout and later the sound of a honking goose and followed by the sound of it taking off from the water (a tape loop that featured in the “Games for May” – see below). Furthermore, the song uses panning and stereo to give the effects of depth and space. The result is a feeling generated that evokes the sun, space and colours of an English field in June. Such a multisensory and embodied evocation of memory can be easily related to the state of awareness of the psychedelic self. The body remains central to this awareness, with the trans-sensory spatiality of memory contributing to the embodied subject.

Even when memory is not fixed upon a place (as is the case with *Grantchester Meadows* and *Matilda Mother*), but within the subject, such as regarding love, there are shifts that destabilize any constant central point of awareness. In *The Narrow Way Parts I II and III* a pure sensation is felt as an embodied memory;

“Close your ears and eyes, be on your way

Pull your thoughts back many years
To the time when there was life with every morning
Perhaps a day will come
When the light will be as clear as on that morning “

The clarity of light is a regular image in the early lyrics of Pink Floyd, as mentioned above in *Set the Controls* as well as *Let there Be More Light* (1968) which features the lyric, “Now, now, now is the time – time / Time to be – be – be aware”. In *The Narrow Way Parts I II and III* the eyes are closed but the light remains, just as Michael Hollingshead advised that “better seen by closing the eyes to images than by opening them” (Hollingshead 1973, p140), for this is the inner light of LSD. Light is here analogous with heightened understanding and awareness. *The Narrow Way Parts I II and III* was written and performed by Dave Gilmour, who replaced Barrett in 1968, but the imagery of the lyrics continues with the idealisation of a

time in life “When there was life with every morning”. This continuity suggests an idealised subject based on nostalgia for childhood.

Furthermore, memory can take on elements of transpersonal awareness, in a similar sense to the egoless state of the idealised psychedelic self. Such a transpersonal memory exhibits binding qualities in another Gilmour song, *Ibiza Bar* (1969) when the human subject becomes a book and a camera – both rational machines for ordering experience.

“I live where I'm left
On the shelf like the rest
And the epilogue reads like a sad song
Please pick up your camera
And use me again

So build me a time
When the characters rhyme
And the story line is kind”

There is of course an ironic metaphor to the lyrics, that life is not rational and humans are not books where “characters rhyme / and the story line is kind”. The irrational, the tragic, as well as the comic dimensions of life underpin the lyrics to *Ibiza Bar*, taken from the LP “More”, the first full record released by the band after the departure of Barrett. But just as the gnome binds with the sky and the river in *The Gnome*, the lyrics of *Ibiza Bar* draws on a form of perception where the boundaries between self and other are lessened.

The psychedelic community in London by 1969 had grown to such an extent that it was no longer a counter culture. The cultural moment moved on, and the “shimmering world [with] just the right effervescence” (Brown & Gaines 1983, p224) had become a parody of fashion fads and bands formed by record labels. In *See Saw* (1968) Pink Floyd present, in a return to the mythology and its archetypes, a couple that can be equated with Gaia and Eros but as siblings, a brother and sister who drift apart when adulthood redefines their relationship,

“Picking up weeds, she hasn't got the time to care
All can see he's not there
She grows up for another man, and he's down
Another time, another day
A brother's way to leave
Another time, another day
Another time, another day
A brother's way to leave”

The unbalanced see saw, “he goes up while she goes down” can be read as the foreshadowing of things to come in the culture, with he (Eros - Love) gone, and she (Gaia) now given to another man. The culture of the ‘straight world’ was not changing as a response to the psychedelic vision that Pink Floyd represented. Rather the larger culture was absorbing the newer smaller one, and through success, fame and money the remaining members of the band were making that move too.

Whimsy and the Psychedelic Self

Whimsy is not just charming but meaningless effect; it is also the expression of a personal revolution. The concept of the politics of the personal, in particular as applied to consciousness is referenced in *See Emily Play*, a song that brings whimsy into the human form of a girl. *See Emily Play* was the second single released by Pink Floyd in 1967 (it was later included on the US release of “Piper” but not the UK release). Written by Barrett, the song features a backwards tape of piano, effects and lyrics, and it is reportedly inspired by the “psychedelic schoolgirl, Emily Young”, at the time a 16-year old who regularly attended the London Free School night sessions around the Notting Hill area of London (Schaffner 2005 65). Emily is both an internal and external self,

Emily tries but misunderstands, ah ooh
She often inclined to borrow somebody's dreams till tomorrow
There is no other day
Let's try it another way
You'll lose your mind and play

Emily’s misunderstanding could be in relation to either the world or her life, or in the specifics of the psychedelic state. This sense of failure is alleviated by the strategy of borrowing “somebody's dreams till tomorrow”. Emily’s borrowed dreams are returned “tomorrow”, which as everyone knows never comes. Play is proposed as an important element of whimsy, as by “let’s try it another way” it is rendered as a means for relating to the world around us, whereby self and the world become one, when you “lose your mind and play”.

See Emily Play was originally called *Games for May*, a song written specifically for an event of the same name that took place on 12 May 1967 in the Queen Elizabeth Hall and that was advertised as featuring "space age relaxation for the climax of spring – electronic composition, colour and image projection, girls, and the Pink Floyd" (Manning 2006, p37). The shift from “Games” to “Play” can be seen as significant in reading the contexts implied by the song. The difference between game and play is that the former has rules, winners and losers, but the latter does not necessarily have to. The transcendence of the immediate needs of life was precisely the context for the activities of Pink Floyd during “Games for May”. During the Pink Floyd performance "some of the band members created sound effects by chopping up wood on stage, a man dressed up as an admiral gave out daffodils" (Manning 2006 38), and borrowing from the weekly UFO club a “machine blowing bubbles into the audience [...] which used soap, water, air, electricity, a small engine and chance to produce volatile and hypnotic visual compositions” in combination with the psychedelic light show (Palacios 2010 p 223). A large gong on stage for the first time accompanied this activity, as well as tympani drums, mechanical toy ducks and wind-up toys, and the introduction of the Azimuth Coordinator, “a device designed to send quadrophonic sound effects across a two-hundred-and-seventy-degree-span” (Palacios 2010 p 224). The experience of play was apparent during the concert, recognised as “the moment Pink Floyd started playing games with technology, bouncing sound all around the hall” (Palacios 2010 p 224). The audience responded with elaborate costumes, toys, the taking of LSD, dancing and play.

Play, whimsy and the psychedelic self are three supports for the narrative world represented in early Pink Floyd lyrics. Play joins the subject with the environment through collaboration and improvisation;

In play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. If we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play, “instinct”, we explain nothing; if we call it “mind” or “will” we say too much. However we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself (Huizinga 1998 p1).

When we play, we lose our self, which may sound trite but actually means that when one is at play one is joined with the moment, the place and those that are in on the play. Social classifications and situations are lessened to such a degree in the act of play as to be meaningless. In a sense, one becomes someone else when we play as a new set of meanings are at work, according to Huizinga’s “non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself”. Play disintegrates these identity systems under very controlled conditions, such as when costumes, props or imaginary places become the set and setting for play, which can then be reversed immediately and that leave no lasting effects, other than memories and perhaps bruises.⁸ Play fixes whimsy into a new set of relationships, depending on the nature of the play. The *Games for May* event was play for adults, offering “space age relaxation” and multimedia experiences. The freeing up of social activity, and the references to the inner self in the media associated with the *Games for May* lead to the third elements in the narrative world of early Pink Floyd compositions, the psychedelic self.

The depiction of the psychedelic self in the early music of Pink Floyd can be charted via ego dissolution and self-binding, borrowed from cognitive neuroscience. Ego dissolution is when “the subject is experiencing the disintegration of a system whose integration she normally experiences in terms of an indivisible mental substance” (Letheby & Gerrans 2017 1). Ego dissolution is a possible reaction for those that are on a LSD trip. The psychedelic self is contingent on the concept of ego dissolution, a mental state that enables,

Subjects to experience cognition not bound by self-models. We emphasise that the ‘self’, which dissolves in psychedelic experience, is not an actual entity or an object of perception, interception, or introspection, but an entity inferred by the mind to predict the flow of experience in and across the cognitive modalities (Letheby and Gerrans 2017 p2).

The degree to which ego dissolution is experienced can be indicated by self-binding, or “the preferential enhancement of cognitive binding for self-relevant information” (Lethby &

⁸ The contemporary genre of Live Action Role Playing (LARP) is an example of the transgressive power of play. The work of American artist Body Condon is an example of how play, under LARP conditions can be used to simulate and alter reality (see Level5 – 2016 and Twentyfivefold Manifestation 2008).

Gerrans 2017 2). The depiction of self-binding in the lyrics of Pink Floyd indicates a movement either towards or away from a conscious self-awareness versus a state of ego dissolution. Self-binding here “does not entail the existence of an object to which attributes are bound - though it does require the representation of an object, to which representations of attributes are bound” (Letheby & Gerrans 2017 2). In other words, when the overriding mode of conscious awareness projects that awareness outwards to objects as separate entities in what can be called material reality.

On the surface, the song *The Gnome* (1967) appears to be a work of archetypal whimsy drawing on Tolkienesque imagery. The early verses support a whimsical reading of the song, with lines like “And little gnomes / Stay in their homes / Eating, sleeping, drinking their wine”. But a deeper examination of the song reveals how it suggests a diminished depiction of self-binding in the egoless state,

And then one day
Hooray!
Another way for gnomes to say
Ooooooooooomray

Look at the sky, look at the river
Isn't it good?
Look at the sky, look at the river
Isn't it good?
Winding, finding places to go

There is a marked shift in the song at verse three, which can be recognized as the climax of the piece. In contrast to the earlier verses, the third verse is spoken not sung. It is the gnome now speaking, which is distinct from earlier verses narrated as the third person subject. It is also the only verse with reverb and delay on the voice and with a dulcimer added. The lyrics make sense as an example of self-binding, and verse three is the point of breaking through into ego dissolution. The gnome is now speaking, and he is experiencing a breakdown in conventional self-modelling, following ego-dissolution, where the river and the sky are now intimate dimensions of his own self. This breakdown is indicated by the use of the singular article “it” to reference both the sky and the water. It is not these two external entities that are “good,” it is the perception of them. Such a breakdown is highly reminiscent of the conditions identified as emerging from play, as the “non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself” (Huizinga 1998 p1). In the case of *The Gnome*, this breakdown is indicated by the musical and vocal changes and the change in address for the lyric, with the gnome now expressing an internal dialogue as opposed to the narrating voice describing him, his actions and surroundings.

If we consider the archetypal text of whimsy, Lewis Carol’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), it is Alice that is experiencing the dramatic shift to a parallel reality and we, the reader, witness it through her senses as the lens of the primary narrative avatar. As Alice runs, grows, shrinks, falls and flies we follow Alice in the narrative, according to her various physical dimensions

and points of awareness in time, as a focalizer which is “a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the story world” (Niederhoff 2011 n.p.). Likewise in the lyrics of Pink Floyd, the listener is positioned in relation to the subject by the syntax and imagery of address, the setting up of a temporal development, the perspective granted on characters and the use of affects and vocal or musical structures. So while whimsy can be defined as funny, strange or humorous, it can have a revolutionary side whereby it is placed in a particular context or explored as a literary device that challenges established concepts of self-identity, temporality, and the nature of reality.

The song *Chapter 24* also from the album “Piper at the Gates of Dawn” (1967) challenges the socially dominant image of reality by introducing chance and the flow of change in the narrated subject. The act of chance and the nature of change as depicted in *Chapter 24*,

Reflects Syd and his peers’ fascination with the I-Ching, which situates us solidly in a period of the 60s when an interest in Eastern religions was percolating over. A syncretic religion was being composed in the parlours of Cambridge and other towns in England at the time. The I-Ching was seen as quite a subversive text because, in a most fundamental way, it threw you open to chance rather than making you submit to dogma (Cavanagh p100).

The syncretic religion that was being composed was psychedelia, with “the I-Ching particularly popular among LSD users and it was a common book to find in flats and squats, consulted and acted upon with the utmost sincerity” (Roberts 2008, 139). “Chapter 24” is indicative of surrendering to chance and acting upon what the I-Ching presented:

All movement is accomplished in six stages
And the seventh brings return
The seven is the number of the young light
It forms when darkness is increased by one

[Chorus]
Change returns success
Going and coming without error
Action brings good fortune
Sunset

The rules imposed by one society and its norms are brought down to a discrete level by allowing chance to play a role in an individual’s daily life. Furthermore, random change goes against power and the concept of authority, along with the hierarchical systems that organize activity according to social norms. The psychedelic religion that this interpretation of the I-Ching supported was a counter cultural one, of rebellion that held the individual as the absolute guide to the spiritual, with the assistance of what they believed was the sacrament of LSD.

Conclusion

The cultural moment of Swinging London, and the sight, sounds and ideas of the psychedelic epiphany was a short one. By 1969 the playful vision and social transcendence of “Games for May” had become a commercial opportunity with hippies, freak-outs, and bum trips featured in popular parodies such as the 1968 Peter Sellers film “I Love You, Alice B. Toklas”. But that brief moment, when psychedelic culture was permitted to flower on its own terms, gave us some of the most colourful and progressive art, music, and literature from the western world in the 20th century. Additionally, due to the pharmacological and psychological dimensions of the culture, particularly related to the use of LSD, the works of early Pink Floyd are among those that provide us with an insight into a collective mind-set, which can be explored more fully within the frames of religion, literature, sexuality, sociology and of course, culture studies. Yet we have not even begun to seriously map the psychedelic self. All “clinical research on LSD came to a halt in the early 1970s because of political pressure following its widespread uncontrolled use” (Liechti 2017, p2114), and it only slowly began again in the 1990s. Today we can report that “the first modern research findings from studies of LSD in psychiatric patients have only very recently been published” (Liechti 2017, p2114). It is just in the past five to ten years that the lyrics of early Pink Floyd can be matched to neuropsychological states of awareness and their images and the ideas that they generate be taken seriously as practical examples of philosophical concepts and cognitive realities related to the psychedelic experience.

The psychedelic experience was given a cultural identity and the rituals of the collective given a mythology and liturgy by the early music of Pink Floyd. According to Richard Alpert, who worked with Timothy Leary but went on to abandon psychedelics for a spiritual life as Ram Dass, “one of the dramatic characteristics of the psychedelic experience is being with another person and suddenly seeing the ways in which they are like you and not different from you and experiencing the fact that yes we indeed are brothers in the true sense of that which is essence in you and is essence in me is indeed one” (Alpert 1988, n.p.). The boundaries of personality and cognition are perceived as weakened in the psychedelic experience. The boundaries that divide up our time, our memories of how we think of ourselves as individuals and that separate each from those around us are felt bodily and cognitively as lessened. Whimsy is a trope that represents or engages with the weakening of boundaries, by introducing humour, sentiment of nonsense. But whimsy does not fully explain either the contexts for the lyrics and music of early Pink Floyd or how these were understood and shared by the audience and fans at the time. I have attempted to show in this chapter how whimsy is a somewhat superficial characteristic of the work. To understand the early music of Pink Floyd it is necessary to engage with the concept of the psychedelic self, and see how the depicted subject of these songs is conditioned by the breaking down of structural time, by the co-opting memory as a means to challenge dominant ideas about age, the body, perception and the autonomy of the self.

The ideals of psychedelic awareness became defining elements for a culture in which hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people shared. Pink Floyd brought an almost unparalleled degree of focus to psychedelic culture. This focus was of course done as a form

of art, with its own unique voice and originality. What remains from that production is a body of work that is rich in cultural meaning. Many people continue to exalt that work, and the artists who created it, in particular through the tremendous myth of Roger 'Syd' Barrett. The prohibitions around the mind altering substances that contributed so much to the culture of Swinging London are now being relaxed in research, and the issues that defined the culture, such as personal freedom, the rights of the individual and minorities (in the form of sexual, gender, ethnic and embodied rights) are now part of everyday discourse.⁹ The products of the genius of Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Syd Barrett, Richard Wright and Nick Mason are now monuments of culture, like points on a roadmap. The years 1967-1969 were grounding for Pink Floyd, and the band went on to develop their approach to both performance and composition based on many of the themes present in their song writing from these years. Today the early works can be viewed as exquisite examples of psychedelic art by a society that is just coming to accept as legitimate the states of mind they represent.

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⁹ One example of this research in the UK today is the Psychedelic Research Group at Department of Medicine, Imperial College London with a 32-member research team.

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